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ABSTRACT

Noting that creative drama activities can have a therapeutic value when used with the elderly in nursing homes, this paper outlines a creative drama program that was used in such a setting. Various sections of the paper describe (1) the nursing home setting, the nature of the participants, and the effects the program had upon them; (2) dramatic exercises used in the program; (3) the role of the activity leaders in the program; and (4) guidelines for designing activities to meet the needs of the institutionalized elderly. The paper concludes that such programs for the elderly can increase their physical activity and mobility, as well as provide them with an opportunity to reminisce, to deal with important issues, to put their lives in order, and to gain a sense of well-being.
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Creative Drama: A Useful Tool For

The Institutionalized Aged

Victoria T. Coffman

The art of theatre provides a multitude of offerings. It provokes the intellect, excites emotional involvement, and invites a sensory response to the structured and aesthetic composition. This menagerie gradually is including yet another means of embellishing the participant's involvement: it provides therapy. In knowing the potential of theatre to meet human needs, man certainly would be negligent not to hear of such potential from those members of society who would benefit most from the magic: the elderly.

Many theatre professionals have not been cognizant of this adaptive value of theatre to the field of aging. Therapy, meaning "to attend" or "to treat," appears to be a viable outcome when creative drama activities are conducted with the elderly within the nursing home setting. Creative drama activities involve the remembrance of the past and the playing out of lost or imagined roles. Creative drama has allowed many participants to explain just how soothing the experience is to act out an old memory or how satisfying the role playing is only for a moment.

Creative dramatics for the institutionalized elderly can be defined as improvisational: utilizing one's past, one's present, or one's fantasy of the future, as the basis for an activity. Improvisations are motivated easily by the use of vivid and pertinent sensory stimulation. This particular type

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of informal theatre seems to be capable of enhancing the quality of life of the elderly by redeveloping their creativity, self-confidence, and social relationships. Many creative drama sessions concentrate on putting into proportion what has happened in the past and now discussing and experiencing questions about the present. Talk centers around the elderly being "at the end of the trail" and "feeling their life has been spent," but discussion continues to give some significance to their worth now as storytellers, orators of history, and as a support and comfort to each other.

In the process of aging, a natural attrition of social contact is witnessed. Several activities are available within the nursing home which alleviate this problem physically by bringing together individuals for a planned group activity. However, this approach satisfies only a portion of their social contacts. Creative drama moves into the area of human sharing, an ingredient so vital to social contact. Providing the institutionalized elderly with a setting to "show" certainly increases the dynamics of their limited social interaction. The entire spectrum of informal drama can be useful for the development of group interaction and personal growth. In creative drama, this human sharing can begin with carefully selected cues which rejuvenate a wealth of impressions from the past. The verbalization of a past history gives confidence to the very feeble present of the extremely elderly individuals. A sense of worth is regained by remembering the meaning and the sub-

stance that each individual had in his days prior to institutionalization. Each then feels significant and creative.

Therefore, the entire approach to creative drama intimates a beginning for what might be viewed as an area of overwhelming interest and great excitement in the near future. Creative drama might be seen as a philosophic and realistic easing to the frustration of aging since it allows the participants to be creative within an improved and nonthreatening environment. It provides for the opportunity to act out old roles or create new ones, to become themselves from another period in their lives, or to become someone else.

The skills of becoming someone else are a readily available technique often employed as an everyday task by many; however it takes form and finds structure most appropriately within the area of creative drama. Children, as an example, learn of life vicariously by acting out events before they occur, that is, preschoolers playing school before they are enrolled, time spent in experimenting with the role of parenthood by playing dress up and tending to dolls. These phenomena are unique not only to children but also rather gainfully executed by adults as they rehearse in private those events soon to be experienced in public.

This notion has implications for the elderly since they are confronted with a depletion of roles. The technique easily could provide for the opportunity to rehearse lost roles, not necessarily for behavior change but for the purpose of pleasant

reminiscence and reconstruction. The skill of rehearsal also may allow the elderly to experiment with new ways of changing their present role behavior.

Physical therapy has been noted for the ability to redevelop motor skills and to strengthen the use of injured body limbs. Thus, creative drama activities provide a similar involvement and treatment on the physical level; however, creative drama moves into additional dimensions of involvement through the use of personalization. The confined elderly experience a multifaceted involvement: use of bodies, voices, and own experiences. Finally, the elderly have the ability to blend all these facets into a cohesive and creative experience. The coupling of physical activity with the use of imaginative play has seemed to be healthy, creative, and meaningful for the participants.

The ability to play and the instinct to play are not reserved for children but can be used in order to accomplish the same goals in the lives of the elderly. Creative play in drama certainly does allow for physical coordination in the elderly as they maneuver their walkers, their wheelchairs, and their bodies to act out an improvisation. The drama need not restrict itself merely to acting out from the chairs but rather to provide the impetus to rise and to move through the room in order to recreate a scene. The use of symbol learning also is applicable to the elderly. After all, most lifetimes are spent in altering symbols and images.

The play of creative drama allows for new symbol learning, new approaches to those symbols which perhaps are outdated now or are not appropriate. A vivid example of symbol change is the receiving of candy. A child receives a box of candy and shows little concern for what the intention was but rather devours the candy with great haste. The young woman receives a box of candy from her lover; her appreciation is directed more toward the love and the thought that were offered with the gift rather than with the candy itself. An elderly woman in a nursing home receives a box of candy in the mail. Her reaction is unlike that of the child or the young woman. The candy may represent a token of affection or guilt on the part of the family for their absence. That same absence results in their not knowing the full ramifications of their mother's aging process--few teeth and a sore mouth.

Creative drama can be utilized for the adjustment of the elderly. The problems need simply to be redefined: the death of a spouse, the failure at a job, or the inability to adjust to other nursing home residents. Quite often, dramatic play can be utilized to rehearse, to act out, or at least to discuss the disturbances of death, the weakening of life, or the condition of widowhood. Certainly, this rehearsal would be advantageous in a society which is characterized as death denial. Generally, also, the continual acting out of life events has allowed the elderly a feeling of active involvement with a past life; the old memories thus become vivid and bring pleasure.

Interestingly, many elderly participants in creative drama activities tend to return to the same events for use as material in improvisations. Preference for certain personal events seemingly stems from a fondness of those memories rather than as evidence of the onslaught of senility. Going over repeatedly what has been experienced seems to validate their present existence. The repetition in itself makes creative drama a worthy vehicle for the restoration of the dignity of the elderly.

When the creative drama project was conceptualized, plans were made to contact a nursing home in Yellowstone County, Montana. The activity director at a large private nursing home was approached and a description of the creative drama project was discussed. The director consented immediately to announcing the activity.

The word theatre was not used for fear that it would discourage participation. The activity, therefore, was billed as "Creative Dramatics." A tentative schedule of weekly meetings was established, and the meeting time was arranged so as not to interfere with meals, exercises, and other activities.

Weekly projects were designed in such a way that college students might function as leaders. Four leaders were trained in the area of creative drama; two of the four had had formal training in gerontology. The youngest leader was a twenty-three-year-old male while the oldest was a fifty-seven-year-old female.

The first session which began in January of 1977 had thirteen participants, all of whom were female. The first meeting provided the group with an explanation of the plans. The nature of creative drama was discussed as well as the types of activities in which the group would be involved. The group exhibited considerable interest; but a number of probable barriers became apparent: hearing and sight loss, boredom, and low mobility. The group was composed of residents from the retirement section of the nursing home. The participants were able to function independently. Within the facility, they occupy private rooms and require minimal care. The participants were all female, a fact which was attributed to two factors: the high ratio of women to men and the difficulty some males display when asked to be involved in an activity that could appear to be "silly" or unmanly.

The weekly activities took place in a carpeted lounge with big upholstered chairs and a sofa. The massive structure of the chairs became awkward because too much distance was placed between the participants; as a result, hearing problems were accentuated. Rearrangement of the furniture to insure intimacy and physical contact became a crucial factor. Making a small circle provided a conducive and friendly climate and allowed for a greater amount of personal sharing.

Several participants required some type of apparatus for movement. A few carried canes; two used walkers; one was in a wheelchair. However, a few sessions with the participants

revealed that physical constraints failed to hamper the movement of any individual. In fact, with proper motivation and stimulation, the participants were observed to move with ease, almost forgetting their low mobility. A momentary cessation of complaining ailments appeared to take place. The conclusion was drawn that creative dramatics did have a value in stimulating physical movement. "Activity, even though greatly modified, is necessary for all persons not only for its psychologic benefits but also to circumvent other complications."¹ A tendency exists for many elderly within the institutionalized setting to sit by the hour in their rooms or in the community lobby. Such patterns not only minimize the physical activity that an individual is receiving but also it produces boredom and empty spaces of time. The creative drama activity, although limited to a short afternoon session each week, seemed to provide a temporary escape from both of the mentioned problems.

Physical Involvement and Imagery

Physical involvement did not stop with the demands of the activity alone--walking, bending, hurrying, for example--but went on to encompass the individual's use of creative body movement to construct a character or add imagery to embellish old memories. Oftentimes, hands were used to reinforce a story or perhaps a shift in shoulder movement was employed to show fear or indignation. The body was being used to communicate emotion or a characterization. Physical disabilities soon appeared to become of secondary importance once the

elderly participant became involved in relating a reminiscence. Exercises were given often to distract the elderly from their physical problems. This exercise early in the project proved helpful.

Moving About The Room As If They Were Afraid

(Exercise and Imagination)

Leader: Let's pretend like there's something very scary around here. We're going to walk around the table and all around the room as if we're alone and afraid. When you're afraid, do you walk like this? (Demonstrates fast walk with arms swinging at sides)

Group: No.

Leader: How do you walk? (to a woman) Show me how you walk when you're afraid and all alone somewhere. (Woman stood up with some difficulty and took short, hesitant steps. She glanced furtively in several directions.)

Okay, that's great. Let's everybody do it.

(They all started moving about, many with the aid of canes, walkers, or wheelchairs.)

You don't smile when you're afraid, do you?

Woman: Your face is tense.

Group: Yes. Right.

Leader: Your body is tense; you look at everybody; you don't know whom you can trust.

Leader: You have wandering eyes that flash back and forth so you can see everything.

(The group moved about slowly following the leader's suggestions. Tensing their faces and bodies, their eyes darted back and forth. A woman in a wheelchair, who was being pushed by one of the leaders, moved her head quickly from side to side as if she were checking things out.)

Leader: Everybody stop. Stop.

(They all stopped.)

Leader: Look. Look. When you think you hear what it is, turn your heads and try to find out what it is. (They all stopped and held perfectly still. They then looked slowly to the right and then slowly to the left.)

Leader: Walk a few more steps.

(They moved forward carefully.)

And now you know . . . It's something . . . That's wonderful--wonderful. And you don't have to be afraid anymore.

(Expressions of relief--smiling, twinkling eyes, sighing.)

This type of activity provided some momentary re-engagement in physical activity. Several of the women were observed to move with an agility that was not evident in their normal,

everyday physical behavior.

The following activity is an illustration of such vivid reminiscence that the participant became totally involved in terms of body movement and imagery. Such was demonstrated particularly in her hand gestures and expressive voice. The participant blocked out interruptions by other people as well as an intercom announcement that blared while she was telling her story. Through the medium of creative drama, this woman--at eighty-seven years of age--became seven years old once again.

Cat Story

(Imagery and Body Movement)

Leader: Can you think of a time in your life when you had something that was really scarey happen to you? Maybe something scarey happened out on the ranch or in a small town. Or a time that was scarey with somebody in your family.

Woman: Well, there was a time when I used to think if I could go to a little country school, if I could go to that school, it would be fun. So I went with my cousin to school.

We walked way down the track and, oh, there was a big snowstorm came up during the afternoon. We had to walk over the hill and then down the track and I looked up . . . my cousin was a very shy girl . . . and I wasn't so shy. There was a

bunch of boys ahead and they reached down and threw some snowballs at her and she ran as fast as she could. I reached down and I saw a black cat was frozen on the side of the track and I picked it up and I hit the fellow on the back of the head just like that. He went like that. (She pantomimes every action.) I thought that I'd killed him.

I ran home as fast as I could get there, and when I got there why . . . my uncle was sittin' in front of the fireplace . . . smokin' his pipe. Frankie Shears' father was there! Oh! I was just shudderin' and, oh, my heart just flopped when I stood there. My uncle said to me, "Why, what did you do, my little girl?"

I said, "Why I hit . . . Frankie Shears on the back of the . . . (VOICE ON INTERCOM: "ATTENTION, RESIDENTS. ATTENTION, RESIDENTS. IONE HOFFMAN IS HERE TO ENTERTAIN YOU ON THE ORGAN IN THE MULTI-PURPOSE ROOM. THANK YOU.")

(The participant did not lose her concentration, but the leader did reach out to reassure her and she continued her story.)

I just picked up this cat and I hit him on the back of the head and he fell down. Well, the man said that I shouldn't have done that because his

Frankie had a mark on the back of his head and he was bleeding when he came home, but he was all right. He said, "But why did you do that?"

And I said, "Well, I did that to defend Stella because they were throwing snowballs at her."

And both of the old men started to laugh. I was only seven years old and the fella was about twelve or fifteen.

Leader: (Taking her hand.) Isn't that good?

Woman: I knocked him out. (She laughed and laughed and laughed.)

The vivid use of imagery allows for the realization of just how meaningful the reminiscence process is. Through the technique of reminiscence, the elderly were able to reconstruct portions of their identity. Goffman argues that the process of "self-mortification"² is characteristic of all individuals who are confined to an institution. The process, which involves interacting with others within the institutional setting, serves to strip the resident of any vestiges of his identity. Therefore, creative drama appears to be a quite useful technique for the recapturing of a lost identity.

To observe the various vocal changes as the elderly participant recreates an old story or creates a new one also proves to be intriguing. The voice, for example, changes tempo; in addition, an increase in inflection takes place. Both of these qualities indicate that some type of personal involvement and

enthusiasm transpires. From a purely physiological standpoint, the vocal variety that is used in the playing of specific roles, that is, an angry mother or an excited young woman, appeared to be an excellent exercise for the vocal chords. On the video tapes, a noticeable difference was heard in the women's voices during the discussion period as compared to the sound of their voices when they assumed a character. During the course of the discussion, the voices were quiet and lacked inflection variety. When the roles were played, the voices exhibited strength as well as an increased use of inflection.

Leadership: Providing a Supportive Climate for
Creativity, Reminiscence, and Role Playing

The quality and the success of any activity offered to the elderly depend largely on the climate and on the motivation that are provided by the leader. Not only must a climate of psychological safety exist, but also such a climate needs to be communicated to the participants if it is to have any kind of thawing effect upon their personal behavior.³

Those projects which appear to be the most successful with the greatest amount of sharing are the ones in which the leader demonstrates a sensitivity to the group. The leader needs to be able to recognize the reticence of some of the elderly and to identify the necessity to verbalize by still others. Furthermore, the leader must be careful to provide enough motivation and enough clarity in order to encourage both discussion and participation and yet not so much stimulus as to confuse the

group.

Several video tapes of the projects revealed struggles in motivation. Often, the participants were willing to participate; at other times, however, they were not.

Beginning an Improvisation

(Motivational Techniques)

Leader: Okay, let's get Marie to be the mother. (Leader is seated next to Marie and is touching her arm.) We have to find a father also. (Leader pauses and looks around the room at the participants.) Who would like to be the father?

Marie: Esther. (Points to Esther. Esther laughs. She is pleased.)

Leader: Okay. Esther and Marie are good friends. Esther can be the father. Now, maybe Esther and Marie . . .

Esther: I can't hear what you're saying.

Leader: Okay. (Leader kneels down at Esther's feet and says.) You're going to be the father.

Esther: Yeah.

Leader: And you and Marie are sitting in the farmhouse visiting and, maybe, your children want to go out and play . . . and they'll discover this child in the hayloft.

Esther: Discover what?

(The leader continues to cast people in the roles

as the children, the snippy neighbor, and the lost child. The energy level appears to be somewhat low today. The people are generally more willing to participate, but they seem to be holding back today. The leader goes over to each individual and really has to urge him to take a part in the activity. Some of the responses are as follows.)

Leader: Who would like to be the children? Esther and Marie's children?

(No response from the group.)

Marie: Let 'em all be.

(Marie is trying to help the leader.)

Leader: Do you want to have four children?

Marie: Yeah.

Leader: I was thinking that it might be good to have someone be the police officer.

(No response from the group.)

Or, maybe, someone to be the mother of the lost child?

(Silence.)

What would you like to be?

Woman: I think I want to be the observer.

Leader: Okay. (To two of the other women.) Why don't you two ladies be the children . . . Okay?

Women: (They smile and they giggle, but they do not say

anything.)

Leader: (Moves to another woman.) And, maybe, you would like to be one of the children also? One who goes out to play in the barn?

Woman: I don't believe so today. Thank you.

Leader: Okay, okay. (Moves to another.) Would you like to be the little girl who was kidnapped? (Puts an arm around the woman.)

Woman: Well, I don't care what I'll be.

Leader: You could be the little girl who was kidnapped up in the barn. Does that sound good?

Woman: Oh, well, I was always good to hide.

In instances such as the one that is cited on page 16, the leader would have achieved far better results and gained far greater involvement if he had allowed the members of the group to select their own characterizations. Moreover, the leader must be careful not to use the motivational segment of the creative activity as an opportunity to share a great deal of his own reminiscences. The goal ought to be to facilitate the expression of the group rather than to utilize the time in expounding personal anecdotes.

A type of helping relationship does develop however. Rogers defines a helping relationship as one in which one of the participants intends that there should come about, in one or both parties, more appreciation of, more expression of, and more functional use of the latent inner resources of the

individual.⁴ Obviously, such a definition covers a wide spectrum of relationships which generally are intended to facilitate growth. The creative drama activity certainly attempts to provide growth by encouraging active involvement in the process of creativity and the process of personal reminiscence. Furthermore, the institutionalized elderly need a creative drama leader whose own notions of aging are established, unlike the young man in the Cohen poem who cries out, "'Marita, Please find me, I am almost 30.'"⁵

In a discussion of therapists, Rogers mentions that the therapist's attitudes and feelings rather than theoretical orientation, are important. Their procedures and their techniques are less important than their attitudes.⁶ The climate for creative drama certainly will suffer if the leader displays skills but lacks an empathic view of the aging process.

Rogers further advocates that the therapist should allow as little of his own personality to intrude as is humanly possible.⁷ Such an approach is suggested, also, for the leader of creative drama. Conceivably, reminiscence statements and expressions will occur with a greater frequency when the creative drama leader works to provide a supportive climate for expression and, at the same time, refrains from too much display of his own personality. The warmth and the caring of the leader generally establish an atmosphere for the elderly to express themselves in a nonthreatening and nonclinical setting, thus making drama a creative method for life review and role

playing rather than a psychological one.

To expect instantaneous results in reminiscing and improvisational role playing is highly unrealistic. Consequently, the leader must devise a concise and flowing activity outline in order to insure both proper motivation and structure for the activity. The leader also should provide a model for the members of the group if they appear to be frightened or to be too hesitant to participate. A method can be read from the transcription below. This transcription was made from a video tape of an actual activity.

Motivational Techniques

(Exercise for Playing Roles)

Leader: Today, I thought that we would try some things with what they call characterizations. (Leader uses lots of body movement and facial expressions.) As you can see, we have all of these hats out on display for you. What I would like you to do is to take a hat, whatever it is, and think about it for a minute. (Leader picks up a hat.) What kind of person would wear this hat? Try to think of a person who would wear this kind of a hat. Can everybody hear me? Imagine in your mind what kind of a person would wear this hat. Think about it for a second. What kind of a person would put this hat on? A tough miner? (Leader puts the hat on.) Mean looking?

Scars on his face? Deep voice? (Leader lowers voice.) Very masculine kinds of things?

Activity Content

Activities in creative drama must be designed to meet the needs of the institutionalized aged; alleviating loneliness is, perhaps, one of the most significant needs that demand attention. Butler and Lewis comment on the issue of loneliness:

The etiology of loneliness developmentally is significant in regard to old people, not in a simplistic sense of comparing them to children but in attempting to comprehend the special character of loneliness in old age. The primitive fears concerning physical survival and emotional isolation recede as human beings grow to adulthood and learn to successfully provide for their own physical sustenance and achieve emotional satisfaction through family, friends and work. But with old age, the combination of harsh external forces and a diminishing self-mastery revives once again the latent threats. The old adage that we are born alone and we die alone reflects the experience that each of us encounters in the course of the life cycle. But unlike the usual experiences of children, the elderly person does not suffer so much from a fear of being unable to relate as from the reality of having no one to relate to.⁸

Apparently, creative dramatics attempts to reduce the isolation of the elderly through carefully planned activities

that are designed especially to increase both socialization and personal interaction. Many activities that are selected for use in the early stages of the project often include the use of props, such as, hats, shoes, gloves, jewelry, and coats, which tend to stimulate ideas and to provide immediate identification of characterizations: cowboy, rich woman, or young child, as an illustration. Props offered the individual participant an object "to hide behind" if the process of acting out became too threatening. Activity content was designed for the following two reasons:

1. To instill a feeling of confidence through encouraged reminiscence
2. To provide an opportunity for fantasy through the use of structured improvisations

Bühler talks about the meaningfulness of the biographical approach when working with the elderly.⁹ The study of life histories is crucial when an individual is interested in the evaluation of the person as a whole. Bühler contends that such evaluation should enable others to know even more about the way that human beings live their lives. The biographical approach is extremely appropriate to creative dramatics because it allows each individual the opportunity to reveal himself through the sharing of his own past experiences. Obviously, the subject matter for creative dramatics activities largely concern the personal history of the aged or the biographical approach as Bühler so aptly recommends. Objective

improvisations proved not to be successful with the institutionalized elderly at the beginning of the project. As a consequence, subjective material became important if any type of participation were to be realized.

The combined efforts of theatre and dramatization of personal history are useful human service tools. Gorelik holds the opinion that dramatic technique is not a goal in itself but is a means to an end.¹⁰ This purpose, he indicates, over centuries of experimentation, may be:

. . . to influence life by theatrical means. Primitive theatre thought it could do this directly, by means of magic ceremonies. Later theatres have been satisfied to reveal to audiences what they considered to be the truths of their times. . . . We may judge the theatre by its own activity. So long as it makes headway toward this goal it is a living institution.¹¹

The content and material of creative drama attempts to influence the life of the aged by utilizing the theatrical. The use of theatricality provides an aesthetic distance not available in typical life review procedures nor in clinical role playing situations. The use of personal history and reminiscence developed in creative drama offers a multitude of ideas for activities. Then, too, personal reminiscences quite often stimulate the greatest energy and interest.

Projects can be generated on any aspect of human life; such projects encompass any of the issues concerning human behavior.

The following categories appeared to be the most fertile for work with the institutionalized elderly.

General Suggestions for Creative Drama: Drama-
tization of Past Experiences

- I. Childhood Years (five to fifteen years)
 - A. Family life as a young child
 - B. Life style as a school child
 - C. Relationships with friends
 - D. Hardships and joys
 - E. Frightening experiences
- II. Young Adult Life (sixteen to twenty-five years)
 - A. Dating memories
 - B. Conduct of the times
 - C. Jobs
 - D. Courtship and marriage
 - E. Celebration of holidays
 - F. Leisure and work memories
 - G. Fears
- III. Later Adult Life (twenty-five to fifty years)
 - A. Family structure
 - B. Occupation
 - C. Outstanding experiences
 - D. Life changes--divorce, death, moving
 - E. Interests (gardening, cooking, the arts, sewing)
- IV. Late Adult Life (fifty-five to ninety years)
 - A. Regrets

- B. Adaptation to nursing home
- C. Concerns with present life
- D. New possibilities

These topics generate ample materials for creative drama activities, activities which are based upon the personal history of each individual. Activities begin with a questioning-and-sharing period and gradually approach the stage of dramatizing the experience. All the elderly may participate in the dramatization and individuals need not act out their own identities in the improvisation but may choose to play the role of someone else.

The following activities sparked the greatest involvement. They appeared to touch on common life issues and provided the greatest response.

Specific Activities Based on Reminiscence

1. Goal: To stimulate the search for the meaning of things.

Performance statement: Expressed orally their feelings of the difference between joy and sorrow.

Activity: Poem based on feelings.
Read two poems, one which is happy, one which is sad. Ask the participants to talk about the things that make them happy and, subsequently, all

the things that make them sad.

Ask the participants a number of relevant questions:

1. How does it feel to be sad?
2. How does it feel to be happy?
3. How do we walk and talk when we are sad as compared to when we are happy?
4. How do your facial expressions change when you are sad or when you are happy?
5. How can I tell from the way that you sit that you are sad or you are happy?

The group responded extremely well to this activity. It provided an outlet for two types of reminiscences: pleasant and sad.

2. Goal: To encourage independence in thought and in reminiscence.

Performance statement: Told orally a story based on an object.

Activity: Show an object, a wooden spoon, for example. Ask participants to tell why they have kept the wooden spoon for seventy years.

Ask the question: What is its special meaning?

This activity allowed each participant the opportunity to share his own fantasy.

3. Goal: To develop awareness to the way that things feel.

Performance statement: Described people they know or have known who are gentle or harsh.

Activity: Pass around a box of materials; some are rough; some are smooth. Talk about the qualities of the material. Ask if they remember people who seemed soft like velvet, for example, or what they remember about people who seemed rough like wool.
Discuss.

Active responses generated from this activity because each participant had known a significantly rough or a significantly gentle person in his lifetime. The gentle and smooth material reminded a few participants of their husbands or children while the rough material recalled many of their teachers and fathers.

4. Goal: To develop a remembrance for the way that things smell.

Performance statement: Participants recalled smells from their past.

Activity: Bring small boxes filled with soap, perfume, onions, oregano, and mint.

Ask relevant questions:

1. What smells do you remember?
2. How did your house smell in summer? in winter?
3. How did it smell after a day of baking?
4. How did the house smell on a cold morning before the fire was built?

Discuss.

This particular activity was a favorite because it stimulated responses which reminded the participants of their childhood. The members of the group recalled the smells of their fathers' pipes, their mothers' cookies, and the aroma of freshly cut hay. The institutional environment has many limitations; seemingly, the pleasantries of varied fragrances are missed.

5. Goal: To recall past relationships.

Performance statement: Participants discussed specific family members.

Activity: Have participants tell the

group about their families.

Motivational statements:

1. I would like you to be
your husband or your
mother, your son, or your
daughter.
2. Demonstrate to me how they
talked.
3. Show me how they looked.
4. Demonstrate to me how they
walked.
5. Show me what they were
like.

The remembrance of a family member apparently was a pleasant experience for the members of the group. They appeared to relish giving specific details about the size and the look of their loved ones. The activity prompted discussion about the desire to have family photographs. Many of the women, however, had no one to visit them. This exercise seemed to bring back precious memories.

6. Goal: To encourage free expression.

Performance statement: The participants will be able to recall and to utter sounds from past experiences.

Activity:

"The Sounds of Life"

Ask relevant questions:

1. What are some of the musical sounds from life which can be played without the use of an instrument?
2. Can you make the sound of people sighing?
3. Can you make the sound of the wind as it comes through your door on a cold winter morning?
4. Can you make the sound of small children laughing, crying, weeping?

When all of the sounds have been explored, then put them together as if conducting an orchestra. The sounds can be discussed. Conversation should be encouraged about sounds from the past.

This activity triggered fond memories of past sounds. One participant mentioned the sound of church bells which rang each day in her village. Yet another recalled the sound of her twin daughters crying for a night-time feeding. Still another woman told of the sounds she heard as the immigration ship on which

she came to the United States sailed across the Atlantic.

7. Goal: To encourage recall and characterization.

Performance statement: The participants were able to recall and to characterize individuals from the past.

Activity: The participants will select a hat from a period, for instance, from 1890 to 1970, and become the person who would wear such a hat. Act out who the person is and what he does. This activity provides an excellent opportunity to discuss specific tastes in clothing and fashions from the past. Interview each character.

NOTE: Many of the residents asked for their own boxes of hats to be recovered from the storage room for use in the activities. The props thus became doubly meaningful since they provided a sense of personalization to each improvisation.

This activity also appeared to be a favorite. The group

requested repeat performances. The joy of the activity seemed to be twofold:

1. They took exceptional pleasure in wearing the wide array of hats. The prop seemed to make the improvisation more believable.
2. The participants were able to become a character from the past or choose one of their own making.
8. Goal: To provide an outlet for discussion of past holidays.

Performance statement: The participants verbalized the unique way in which they prepared and spent their holiday season.

Activity: This activity can be performed on such holidays as Easter, Christmas, and Halloween. The purpose is to generate discussion about each individual's past customs. Act out, for example, a holiday dinner.

Ask such relevant questions as:

1. What did they bake?
2. What were the major activities of the day?
3. What was the entertainment if any?

4. What do you remember in particular?

Many of the elderly were unable to communicate with their nearest and dearest either because they were deceased or because they were some distance away. An activity which speaks most emphatically to this issue is one of remembering a special moment from the past, a holiday, for instance. Peace of mind comes from the reliving of the moment through drama; a relative or close friend need not be present to hear or to share in the experience. The creative drama activity brings the memory into play; on the whole, the participants found the activity both soothing and satisfying.

9. Goal: To encourage emotional feelings and to show those feelings.

Performance statement: The participants described orally one of the most wonderful days in their lives.

Activity: Pantomime based on a situation. The participants are to tell a story about something wonderful that happened to them. They are to be encouraged to impart the uniqueness of the experience and of their own personalities. Tell them that what appears to be wonderful for one

person may not appear wonderful to another. Have them recreate their moments by acting them out; encourage them to tell the group afterwards how the recreation made them feel.

Finally, the participants are to write a card to the person who experienced the wonderful moment with them, even if the person is no longer alive.

This activity was conducted some four months after the inception of the project. Acting out of personal experiences always seemed to be gratifying to the members of the group. However, this exercise did not seem appropriate until a significant amount of interaction and sharing had been developed. The uniqueness of this activity comes from the highly personalized nature of the content. The group remarked that they felt good to have shared such a significant moment from their lives.

10. Goal: To develop an awareness of the taste of things, now and in the past.

Performance Statement: The participants recalled the taste of foods from the past.

Activity: "Food and Reminiscence"

Have available the following foodstuffs: a jar of honey,

powdered sugar, a small loaf of freshly baked bread, pickled beets, walnuts, and oatmeal. This activity should prompt discussion.

Ask relevant and thought-provoking questions:

1. What do you remember about food from your past?
2. Who did the cooking?
3. What kinds of food did your family eat?
4. Are foods prepared differently today than they were in your past?
5. Can you remember participating in some highly pleasant moments around the dinner table?

The above activity is excellent for providing full entry, participation, and response on the part of the elderly. Again, the all-female group responds with delight to the sharing of once favorite recipes. Discussion generally centers around the types of ingredients no longer available in the supermarket of today. Such ingredients included rich thick cream, hand-ground flour, and pullet eggs. The joy of memories in the kitchen were

evident by the meticulous pantomime that each of the women used. They methodically remembered the exact amounts of flour to sift, the careful mixing of cream and sugar, and the shaving of the clove or vanilla bean. The interest and the eye for detail revealed a basic fondness for cooking on the part of the female participants; then, too, obvious was the sorrow that they experienced since they no longer functioned in the role of homemaker in their current and everyday life in the nursing home setting. Such incidents and work patterns of the past seemingly held more importance than the lives in which they now participated.

The creative drama activity also attempts to offset the rigidity of the institutionalized environment by emphasizing the uniqueness of each individual. Improvisations can be constructed in such a way so that the rooms that are used in the activity are former rooms of the participants. An example follows:

Leader: Marie, today we will act out an improvisation that takes place in a kitchen. Could you describe your kitchen at home to us and we'll try to use your ideas for our setting.

Even this slight suggestion of a past room offers much comfort for the participant as she relays the description. Developing questions which demand a response of self, an opinion, or a personal idea are effective means of meeting the generalized atmosphere of the nursing home. As a result, a sense of self-

worth begins to emerge. This emphasis on the personal moves the participant into a comfortable setting for sharing. An interest in each other appears to increase as individuals listen to the private thoughts and ideas of each other. The mode of communication that generally prevails in a nursing home is one of impersonal interactions at most; members seem to talk mainly about the weather or about their illnesses and discomforts. The specific and intimate reminiscences that are stimulated by creative drama seem to take the elderly out of a formal manner of interaction and bring them into a realm where basic fears and memories are discussed.

Creative drama and the playing of images is not a process bound only to the lives of the young but rather a creative way for all human beings, including the elderly, to celebrate and to review their own lost imagery. Seemingly, the development of creative drama programs in the nursing home setting attempts to ease the aloneness and isolation of solitary reminiscence. The program allows for an engaged society--students--to connect and to add meaning to the disengaged segment of the population--the elderly. Creative drama takes the solitary reminiscence of the individual and transfers it to a group setting. It provides for voluntary exposure to private thoughts and, at the same time, allows for a public performance of each individual's past. A monologue may result, but the speaker does have an audience. Rather than being shy and withdrawn, the elderly, on most occasions, were willing to

share and were eager to allow their past experiences to be known.

The young adult often savors his own private thoughts and, perhaps, the awareness of impending death frees the elderly from secrecy. This awareness in conjunction with disengagement--letting go of normative behavior--makes possible and, perhaps, necessary, a sharing of self while life is still present.

Activities Based on the Playing of Lost or

Imagined Roles

Formal drama deals with full length, or at least one-act plays. Creative drama (informal drama) offers a wide spectrum of improvised work. Improvisation, therefore, becomes pleasurable because it allows for absolute freedom in the creation of one's own spontaneous dialogue. The characters that are created are entirely what the individual views them to be. As a consequence, the roles which then can be explored are of all types.

The institution erects invisible barriers between the resident and the outside world, invisible barriers which can result in a total loss of the personal roles of the resident.¹² Almost all institutionalized individuals are simply not equipped to assume the roles of a mother or a father, a grandmother or a grandfather, an aunt or an uncle, or a friend in the same manner that these roles were played on the outside. These roles, most assuredly, are lost and, regrettably, cannot be retrieved.

Creative drama activities offer a recapturing of these roles through the medium of reminiscence and improvisation. Activities can be devised to include the roles of a mother, a father, a child, a grandmother, or a wife. The activities tend to delight the institutionalized elderly who participate, and they serve to produce a flood of memories which give both joy and self-confidence by the remembrance of their past lives.

Quite often, the group expressed a desire to be close to their families as well as to moments of the past. The following transcribed excerpt from a video tape speaks of the frustration of being alone in a nursing home.

Being Far Away From Family and Loved Ones

(Subjective Responses Flowing From
Imagined Situations)

Woman: I'm so far away from them now. If I was near them, it would be different. Boy, if you'd read the letters that I get from those people. They were very dear to me. But I didn't get to go back to be with them.

Leader: You wish you could be back with those people who you love?

Woman: Oh, boy! I wish it so many times.

Group: That's your wish right there.

Leader: Where are you from?

Woman: Florida.

Leader: Do you get letters from those people in Florida?

Woman: Oh, yes.

(Leader moves over to front of the woman's chair and touches her arm.)

Leader: Well, then, maybe, we could start the skit out by you wishing you could be back with your people, and we could talk about it.

Woman: I know it won't do me any good.

Leader: But it's sometimes good to talk about it. And just to wish. (To group.) Don't you all have wishes like that. Wishes aren't always wonderful. Wishes are satisfying something in us that's very sad sometimes. Isn't that right? We wish for all kinds of things.

(To woman.) So we could talk about that. I think that's a very good wish.

The relative importance of the various roles needs to be distinguished by the degree of internalization of the role expectation. The more that a role expectation is internalized, the more adequately the role is performed. Significant roles might include the following: the parent, the spouse, the homemaker, and the worker. Secondary roles might include the following: the user of time, the friend, the fisherman, and the bridge club member. Peripheral roles generally are to be considered as more formal such as the role of the citizen or that of a club member.

Based upon this notion that the more that the role expec-

tations are internalized, the more adequate the role performance, creative drama attempts to provide roles from the significant category. The peripheral roles do not offer the dimensions that are needed to create a full characterization; and, as a consequence, they do not serve as strong motivators for the creative experience of reminiscence. The significant roles, on the other hand, are not only personal but also involving ones which allow the participant an expansive opportunity for creating and for remembering. It generally is an easy task for the women to remember themselves as a wife, a mother, and a worker but much more difficult to achieve a sense of how they felt when they were citizens or club members.

Goffman has analyzed social behavior as if it were a dramatic performance. He finds that most individuals have a highly developed ability to play successfully the role that is demanded at any given moment.¹³ The performances of the institutionalized elderly, as displayed in creative drama, certainly allows for the realization that the skill of playing a role is not hampered by age, by sensory loss, or by low mobility.

The following transcription was taken from a video tape that was filmed eight months after the inception of the project. The group was ready and willing to express their thoughts on being old and being confronted with loss, even the loss of sexuality.

The Sunshine Home

(Group Interaction)

Leader: We have someone in the group who used to do a lot of drama. It would be fun to think of some improvisations that we could do sometime in the future. Can you think of an idea that would be nice for us to do?

Woman 1: Well, I think that it needs to be a sitting down activity.

Leader: Okay, that sounds just great. You can sure use your imagination sitting down, can't you?

Woman 1: Uh-huh . . . How about . . . this is the Sunshine Home? (Laughs)

Leader: Who lives in the Sunshine Home?

Woman 1: Some elderly people!

Leader: Why don't we have a scene where we have . . .

Woman 1: Or do you want some younger people?

Leader: Oh, no, I think it's great to do elderly people. We'll do a sitting-down scene with a group of elderly people. How old do you want to be?

Woman 2: Ninety-five.

Woman 3: I was going to say eighty.

Leader: So it's a group of elderly people; they're all between eighty and ninety-five years old. What's next? What's the plot going to be.

Woman 3: There can't be any. They're too old.

Woman 2: You never get too old.

Woman 3: Oh, yes, you do--and how!

Leader: Okay, what would be a good plot? What is some sort of conflict that goes on in a home like the Sunshine Home?

Woman 1: There's constant conversation.

Leader: Conversation about what?

Woman 1: Everyone!

Woman 2: Say the nastiest things you can about people.

Leader: Oh, no, is that what you do?

Woman 1: Those are the things you hear about yourself.

Leader: That doesn't warrant a great play, does it? How about a man that comes to do some maintenance work . . . Does that sound too racey?

Woman 3: That's about the only thing they come in to do.

(Group laughter)

We're too old to attract them now.

Leader: What would be some work that young men would do if they came in?

Woman 2: Make love to the women.

(More laughter)

Leader: Oh! Besides that? (Laughter continues.)

Woman 3: Never fear--it would never happen.

Woman 1: Wash windows.

The group then went on to create an improvisation with a window washer who enters the Sunshine Home as a main character.

All of the women residents fall in love with him. The scene ends with the lad running for his life.

The notion of rehearsal and role playing has been successful for the institutionalized elderly, and much of the success, interestingly enough, can be found in the distance that these techniques provide. Corrigan concurs,

Some experiences overwhelm us or are too difficult for us to handle directly. As a result, we step out of ourselves and behave somewhat as if we were actors in a play.

There are accounts of people whose grief was so great at the death of a loved one that the only way they could get through the funeral was to transform the occasion into a play in which they were the central actors performing grief for the attending "audience."¹⁴

Apparently, the group of women who participated in the improvisation gained some modicum of comfort from the rehearsal of their sexual losses.

The situations in the following activities are given by the leader, and the group takes a minimal amount of time to plan. Each activity involves the playing of roles within a given situation and might be termed instant creativity since it is done with some planning but with a maximum amount of imagination and concentration. These situations that were constructed by the leader did not achieve the type of extensive involvement that is found in the personal improvisations developed by the group.

Situations

1. You are a group of women at a tea. You are having a wonderful time until you taste the cheese cake dessert; the dessert is spoiled and tastes sour. It takes you awhile to find the courage to inform the hostess how terrible the dessert is.

Comment: The success of this activity is attributed to the interest in food on the part of the group.

2. You are all waiting in a doctor's office. Each of you has a specific illness, injury, or problem. The nurse comes in to tell you that the doctor is going to leave on an emergency and only one more patient can be seen. You all must argue that the patient that he must see is you. Give your reasons why your case, in your opinion, is so important.

Comment: The participants struggled with the dialogue in this activity. They preferred talking about personal illnesses.

3. A family of four--mom, dad, daughter, and son--are sitting down for dinner. It is time to plan the summer vacation; each of you wants to go to a different place. Let us hear where and why you want to go to your chosen spot and then resolve the problem by making a decision about which place you will choose.

Comment: This activity offered little or no relevance

to their lives; therefore, it was not at all successful.

4. You took the family car last night. You wrecked the car and must come to breakfast. At that time, you will have to tell your family about the accident. All of the members of the family could be present. Decide on which members will be there.

Comment: Again, this situation did not contain an issue which prompted much interest or concern for the group. The content seemed to be frivolous. The ladies preferred subject matter of a more personal nature.

5. A husband and wife live in a rented house. The rent is raised another forty dollars a month. The landlord will be coming to collect the extra money for this month. What happens? What do you do?

Comment: Ample discussion followed this activity. The women shared personal anecdotes and newspaper accounts on the financial plight of indigent elderly.

6. Your favorite boy friend calls to invite you out for the evening. He wants to go dancing, and he loves to waltz. You have been entirely too bashful to learn how to dance. You quickly call a friend, and she comes over to your house to give you a lesson.

Comment: The group enjoyed this activity. Several

women talked about box-lunch dances while two women volunteered to give a waltzing lesson to the other members.

7. It is a late rainy night. You and the family are sitting in the parlor visiting. You suddenly hear a noise from the basement. The noise continues. What is wrong? What do you do?

Comment: The very nonpersonal nature of this activity seemed to prevent any full participation and response.

All of these activities required more planning than did the situations which were developed from a personal reminiscence. The time factor also appeared to be a problem, and the women quickly lost interest. In addition, the majority of the nonpersonal improvisations that were constructed by the leader generally elicited a subjective response on the part of the women.

Motivation Through a Wish Technique

Leader: For next week will you be thinking about a few ideas for improvisations. If you had a wish, what would it be? What is the most important wish in the world for you?

Woman: Well, I'd have to act dead. . . . This last month I'll betcha a half a dozen times I wished I could die.

Leader: How come? Because you didn't feel well?

Woman: Because I'm no good to anybody any more. And I

feel so tired. Just exhausted every day. One day is worse than another. And that's no way to have to feel.

Leader: No. I know that's true. But just know that you're so good to a lot of people. Maybe, we could put on a skit where we talked about your good wishes and your bad wishes.

Use of Props as a Stimulator for Life Review
and Reminiscence

Loss is a predominant theme in characterizing the emotional experiences of elderly people. The losses range from the severe emptiness that is felt from losing a partner and children to the endless list which includes job loss, loss of house, loss of health, loss of motor skills, loss of mobility, loss of free choice, and loss of personal possessions. The use of props and other memorabilia in creative drama activities attempts to minimize a few of these losses by replenishing a contact with certain items that are common to all. The items generally include hats, shoes, and coats from the 1920's through the 1960's. To be kept in mind is the fact that the aged in the institutionalized setting may not have photographs, scrapbooks, or other memorabilia from their past. Therefore, to be able to use the ability to reminisce as the basis for a vivid recapturing of the past tends to prove refreshing.

When props are used, a wealth of opportunity presents itself for a discussion of past history. Little threat to the

participants is involved since the items are universal. The hats remind the participants usually of the many ways that they used to feel; one shared memories of a daughter, for example, trying on hat after hat, Sunday after Sunday. The subject of hats also allows the participants to notice how the times have changed and how hats, somehow, have lost their significance in a woman's all-over appearance. In addition, hats provide for imaginative improvisation. They allow the participants the joy of becoming someone else.

The following excerpt is a transcription from a video tape. It illustrates how one of the participants, an eighty-six-year-old woman, assumed the role of a male golfer.

Golfer-Hat Exercise

Woman: . . . I don't talk to the ladies. I'd rather talk to you. What I mean is . . . I can't talk to the ladies very well. I'm a golf player and I just have to have my mind on golf.

Leader: Well, so am I. We'll have to talk about golf.
(The woman puts on a hat that she thinks looks like a golf hat.)

Leader: You say you're a golfer?

Woman: Why, certainly. I'm a champion. Don't you know Jack Nicklaus for cryin' out loud.

Leader: Oh, I'm sorry, Jack.

Woman: Why don't you wake up?

Leader: I'm so nervous . . .

Woman: Don't you ever read the papers?

Leader: I'm so nervous. Meeting a star and celebrity.
(The woman chuckles and smiles warmly.) . . .
I don't know how to act.

Woman: Well, that's all right. I'm Jack Nicklaus and
I've been champion time and time again. I've won
many, many championships. I've made well over a
million dollars.

Leader: May I shake your hand?

Woman: If it don't cost me anything.

Leader: No, it won't cost you anything except maybe an
autograph at the end of the interview.

Woman: Okay.

Leader: What prompted you to start golfing as a career?

Woman: When I was a kid, I used to caddy for a real
old-time golfer. I was about ten years old, and
he showed me various kinds of tricks to do with
the clubs--you know--various shots to make. Then
I got to playing and I got to be a real . . .
golfer.

Then I started getting into the big tourna-
ments. Well, that's been quite a number of years
ago, and the pay wasn't like it is today, you
know. Today, when you win, you make about fifty
or sixty thousand dollars. Back there when I was
starting out if you won five or six thousand

dollars, you were doing pretty good. Well, anyhow, I've won over a million dollars playing golf.

Leader: Wow! That's beautiful. That's really talent.
That's great!

Woman: That's the honest to God truth, Mister.

Leader: I believe you, sir.

Woman: Well, you better.

Leader: What do you think of the newfangled clubs? I'm sure they've changed since when you started golfing.

Woman: Oh, yes. Used to be you'd have a driver and a putter and a couple of irons. Now, you've got 1, 2, 3 . . . 7, 8, . . . nine irons, and you've got a driver and a brassie . . . no, you've got three woods . . . wait a minute, you've got four woods. You've got a 1, a 2, a 3, and 2 4 and some of 'em use a 5 wood. Caddying is a big job these days, you know.

Leader: Would you please show me your tee-off swing?

Woman: Yes. (The woman stands up and pantomimes setting up for the tee-off, the swing itself, and the follow-through. She demonstrates position and movement. When she sits down, she continues to show the leader what to do with the knees, the head, and the arms.)

Comment: This participant thrilled the group with her

scene not to mention the renewed energy and joy that she felt from the acting process.

According to Butler and Lewis, losses include the extrinsic--personal and social loss plus forced isolation--and intrinsic--nature of personality changes, physical disease, and the shrinking body.¹⁵ The creative drama activity attempts to add dimension to the isolated elderly by adding to their shrinking existence through the use of reminiscence.

In summary, the focus here becomes involvement in the creative process. A strong sense of the present is evident, an experiencing of an outgoing meaningful reality. The concern for a polished product to be performed before a traditional audience becomes of little importance. Consequently, certain important elements are present in the creative drama process as it relates to work with the elderly. First is the probability of at least momentary re-engagement. Second is the provision to the elderly of an opportunity to reminisce, to deal from a safe distance with important life issues, to put their lives in order, and to gain a sense of well being. In addition, the chance for worthwhile social contacts and interaction is present. Furthermore, benefits are shown in increased physical activity and mobility. Finally, in creative drama exists the possibility for creativity, storytelling, playing, and, subsequently, enjoyment of life.

Footnotes

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14. Robert Corrigan, The World of Theatre (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1979), p. 10.
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